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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes results of three focus groups which examined teachers' ideas and attitudes about the utility of research on the practice of teaching reading to students with learning disabilities and about forms of communication that would make research information more useful. The focus groups were part of a larger project designed to improve the "translation" and dissemination of research utilizing a social marketing approach. The three groups were composed of either special educators, general educators, or both special and general educators. Groups discussed: instructional teaching strategies and problem solving; the use of research in developing and choosing instructional teaching strategies; specific attitudes and concerns about reading instruction, especially for students with learning disabilities; and information needs. Findings included: teachers tend to use research as either background information or as a source of possible classroom strategies to be evaluated in the light of experience, experimented with if promising, and discarded if unsuccessful; teachers prefer to learn from other teachers; and teachers distrust mandated instructional approaches (e.g., whole language). Implications for communication to teachers are: (1) teachers prefer to learn in social, interactive ways; (2) teachers need the verisimilitude and authenticity of knowing that a learning medium was researched and used by real teachers in real classrooms; (3) any form of communication by non-teachers to teachers will be more effective if the teachers are addressed/treated with the respect accorded to other professionals; (4) when communicating with teachers in writing, keep messages concise and readable; and (5) teachers are members of the general public, and can be persuaded by means of the same mass media strategies that are used to persuade the rest of us. (DB)

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ERIC/OSEP SPECIAL PROJECT

REPORT ON FOCUS GROUPS:
Research and Practice - Reading Instruction

February 14, 1995

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1. HIGHLIGHTS: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 1994, the ERIC/OSEP Special Project held a series of three teacher focus groups to examine the ideas and attitudes of teachers about the utility of research in practice and about forms of communication that would make research information more useful, and usable, to them. These focus groups, and the analysis of them presented here, represent the first stages in the development of a social marketing plan for OSEP/DID that is intended to change and improve teachers' beliefs about research and their use of it in the classroom. In order to make the general topic more concrete and to focus on a critical area of instruction, the teaching of reading was chosen as the first exemplar, the area that the focus groups and the initial social marketing activities would emphasize.

The highlights of the information we have gathered from the focus groups include the following:

- When teachers use research, they tend to use it either as "background information" (e.g., keeping up with the literature or staying ahead of parents) or as a source of possible strategies to be evaluated in the light of experience, experimented with if promising, and discarded if unsuccessful.

- Teachers prefer to learn from other teachers, or from people who can demonstrate real and recent classroom experience. This means that:

    - ♦ Teachers do not use written research materials that do not demonstrate a thoroughly grounded working knowledge of the realities of day-to-day teaching, and they determine this intuitively;

    - ♦ Teachers feel they learn best from demonstrations -- preferably in person, but, if no, video is effective;

    - ♦ Teachers tend to go first to a respected fellow teacher to problem-solve.

- Teachers distrust mandated instructional approaches (e.g., whole language) for essentially two reasons:

    - ♦ No one approach works for all children; one size does NOT fit all.

♦ Mandated approaches do not respect the judgement of teachers as professionals to select the instructional strategies best suited to the child's needs and to the teachers abilities. Teachers are aware that they are not involved in the selection of mandated approaches.

"If it weren't for whole language, LD teachers would be out of business."

• Teachers, especially special education teachers, have learned to avoid the mandates as long as they get results for their students.

• Teachers are generally unaware that research does not support the use of whole language.

"You just close the door and do what works."

• Teachers are aware that different children learn differently and that children with learning disabilities cannot learn to read using only whole language. Experience tells teachers that a combination of approaches works best in teaching reading.

• Teachers want opportunities to keep their knowledge up to date by attending conferences and having meaningful professional development; they are aware that those who are given the time and money to attend conferences are generally those who are not in the classroom anymore. This is made even more difficult for teachers because they know parents who go to these conferences; this can put the teacher in the unhelpful position of knowing less about a method or a disability than some of the students' parents do.

• Teachers consider most inservice training to be irrelevant to real teacher and student needs; when it is relevant, they consider the lack of followup assistance and consultation to be a fatal flaw.

• Teachers of students with disorders for which the knowledge base is rapidly changing – especially autism and ADD – want the latest research information, because they know they need it to stay ahead of the knowledge level of the parents.

• Teachers expect the content of the materials they use to be based on research, but without the presentation of dry technical data. For teaching strategies, teachers expect materials that have a clear grounding in real educational settings and demonstrate the adaptability and creative use of the strategy.

- Although teachers do not want the materials addressed to them to be oversimplified or elementary, they find materials of that sort useful as handouts for parents.

- Stories in the mass media about effective instruction would bolster both awareness of, and confidence in, the research enterprise.

2. INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the ERIC/OSEP Special Project has examined ways of better understanding the "translation" and dissemination of research and ways of improving its dissemination and utilization. We have conducted a number of focus groups of practitioners and staff developers; we have searched the literature in several disciplines for insights on effective communication; and we have experimented with different types of products and modes of distribution and publicity.

Last year OSEP/DID gave us the more global assignment of utilizing a social marketing approach to develop a plan that we and others in the field can use to improve teachers' perceptions of, attitudes toward, and use of special education research. The topic of "instructional approaches to the teaching of reading to students with learning disabilities" was chosen as the initial focus for the social marketing plan. Our collaborators in this activity are The Widmeyer Group, consultants with special expertise in social marketing and the development of media campaigns, and NCITE (the National Center for Improving the Tools of Educators), an OSEP/DID-funded center that, among its other undertakings, has developed a comprehensive synthesis of the research base on effective approaches to the teaching of reading to children with diverse learning needs. The Widmeyer Group is working with us on the development of the social marketing plan, of which this focus group analysis is the first stage, and on the implementation of the plan. NCITE is working with us in providing the synthesis data on which the marketing "messages" and various practitioner products will be based, in reviewing our materials in draft form to assure fidelity to their findings, and in disseminating the products that will result from this project.

3. PURPOSE

The goals of the focus groups were to discover:

- How teachers make decisions about choosing and evaluating the effectiveness of instructional strategies.
- What role research plays in choosing and evaluating the effectiveness of instructional strategies.
- How teachers make decisions about reading instruction for students with learning disabilities and how research on reading could help them.
- How teachers would like to receive research-based information.

The following report discusses the findings, conclusions, and recommendations drawn from these focus groups.

4. METHODS AND FORMAT

The following analysis is based on the results of discussions in three focus groups of elementary school teachers including: special education teachers from Fairfax County, Virginia; special and general education teachers from Montgomery County, Maryland; and teachers from across the country involved in the American Federation of Teacher's Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) Program during the AFT's annual convention in Anaheim, California.

It is important to keep in mind that focus group research is qualitative, not quantitative. While the opinions expressed in these groups are extremely useful in understanding the general attitudes of teachers, these results cannot be projected with any statistical confidence to an entire population.

The groups were made up as follows:

Fairfax County - Special Educators - 7 participants.
All are active elementary school teachers in Fairfax County, VA public schools.

AFT ER&D - General Educators - 9 participants.
This group was made up of elementary school teachers who are part of a network of teachers who are active users of research. Some train their colleagues in research topics chosen by the AFT. This group included teachers in urban areas and teachers with a high proportion of ethnically and racially diverse students.

Montgomery County - Special and general educators - 5 participants. All are elementary school teachers in the Montgomery County, MD public schools. Most of these teachers have a high proportion of ethnically, and racially diverse, as well as economically disadvantaged, students.

Each of the focus groups lasted approximately 2 hours and was led by a facilitator who asked participants questions about the following topics:

- General attitudes and concerns about instructional teaching strategies and solving instructional problems in the classroom.
- General attitudes and concerns about the use of research in developing and choosing instructional teaching strategies and in solving instructional problems in the classroom.
- Specific attitudes and concerns about reading instruction for all students and especially those with learning disabilities.

- Information needs, suggested content, format, and vehicles considered effective and desirable in making research data on reading accessible and usable for teachers.

The focus group questions were designed to determine how research could be made useful to teachers and what the most effective vehicles would be for distributing new research findings about reading instruction for students with learning disabilities and other special education issues. The questions encouraged open conversation to reveal the attitudes, values, and experiences underlying participants' opinions.

5. FINDINGS

5.1 The Relationship Between Research and Practice in Education

5.1.1 Instructional Challenges

Teachers said their greatest instructional challenges were finding time to prepare for classes and teaching a diverse population of students. Special educators identified the increasing student/teacher ratio as posing a challenge: "With more inclusive types of education it's hard to handle the caseloads we have and be as effective as we want to be." Special educators also said they "need time to balance instructional challenges with teaching social skills to special ed kids."

Special educators said the "paper trail" of documenting progress through Individual Education Programs for students with disabilities takes time away from planning classroom activities. A Fairfax County teacher said, "I do not have enough time for what I have to do . . . With the responsibilities I have for testing, screening, child study, information releases and everything else that comes my way, teaching is only a part of what I do. I never feel at the end of the day that I've been able to do the quality of teaching for the kids that I would like to do. I don't have the time to do it. My main enemy is time."

5.1.2 Teachers' Experience with Research

Most teachers' experience with research is limited to the courses they take, both pre-service and for advanced degrees and continuation of their teaching certificates. "When I look at research, it's when I'm taking coursework," said one teacher. But teachers also say that their pre-service study of research suffered because they had no grounding in a real classroom setting. A special education teacher said that now that she has spent time in the classroom she would like to go back to "relearn" the research, because when she was a student she could not judge the relative importance of any particular piece of research.

5.1.3 Attitudes toward Research

A central theme of the discussions in the focus groups revolved around the value of research to teachers. In the course of their professional careers, teachers have all had experiences with research. Their comments reflect a perception that overall, research does not play a central role in how they do their jobs on a daily basis. As the teachers defined their roles and the decisions they make in choosing strategies and deciding if they work, all identified themselves as pragmatists who rely on empirical evidence: Is the strategy helping their students learn? More specific information about teachers' attitudes toward research is described below.

5.1.4 Choosing Teaching Strategies

When teachers talked about how they would choose a strategy for instruction, their most important criteria were based on whether they felt they could make a strategy work in the classroom and whether they felt their students' skills would improve.

Teachers choose instructional strategies on the basis of the needs of the individual child and their own teaching styles. Individualization is standard operating procedure for special education teachers. General education teachers also reported that they try to tailor teaching strategies to the individual needs of their students. One teacher said about her choice of strategies, "It's never the same. A technique that generally might work for children with a [particular] learning style may not work. Then you look at the child and how well they've done and ask yourself,`what else do I know that may make a difference.'" Another added, "The more you can individualize, the better off you are."

An AFT teacher familiar with research on broader educational reform issues argued that the tendency for teachers to look for individualized, quick fixes in instructional strategies prevents them from thinking of research as an agent for school reform. "I think there would be more of a push for research on restructuring if teachers, especially elementary teachers, could be awakened to it. I think for some reason they have been stalled on a `cutesy technique level'. . . and they probably don't see beyond little individualized tiny things they do or a cute way of grabbing children's attention."

When teachers are choosing strategies to use in their classrooms, they report that they, "need to start with questions . . . Too often we are presented with answers but there hasn't been reflection and dialogue about what the questions are."

One way teachers say they can tell information is worthwhile and applicable is if they feel that it is coming from someone who has been in the classroom and knows the challenges they face. Said one teacher, "If I decide to try something, generally I had a feeling that the person writing the article is out there in the trenches and is giving some tried and true practical advice. Often we'll read things and say, `Oh yeah, when's this guy been in the classroom?'" Another teacher added that she would want research-based information from "someone who's not so far removed from the classroom that you're saying to yourself, `there's no way that's going to happen.'"

Teachers consider two issues when they are thinking about trying a teaching strategy. First, will it work? Second, what are the challenges to making it work in my classroom? Teachers want answers to their questions, but they want them straight. They want to know how effective a strategy will be and what, if any, are the obstacles to successfully implementing it. A special education teacher said, "I want to know if it was successful, but I also want to hear `these are things that I tried initially.' I want to hear about the pitfalls, I want to hear about the things

that were tried . . . You can only pull out of [research] what you feel is going to work for your one student or group of students."

"I want to know the how-to and I want some examples," many of the teachers in the focus groups told us. Even though they expressed the desire to build on research-based strategies on their own, the basic ingredients they need for that process are concrete and workable descriptions of how research-based strategies can be applied in the classroom. Teachers want a description of how a strategy can be implemented easily and an example of how someone else was able to do it. "If the study or examples they're using for the study appear to be something that's easily put together and clear, it's something I would try."

When teachers are thinking about the issues and challenges related to instruction, most say that research is not the source they would look to for answers. Some do not use research at all. One teacher put it very bluntly when she said, "I can never get anything too practical out of research." Many teachers cannot see how research relates to the realities that they encounter in their classrooms. "The topics that research covers don't necessarily match with typical daily problems," said one special educator. A general educator in another focus group added, "There's something to be said for the real world application...It touches a need that they [teachers] have...We're not seeing research as connecting with the real world."

When research-based strategies are presented as a complicated process, teachers reject them. A general educator said, "Sometimes you can read this stuff and it's a wonderful idea, but there are twenty steps to it . . . and it's just not workable. It's just not possible with a large group of children." Added another, "It's got to be to the point, it's got to be workable, it's got to be fairly clear."

Only after teachers have been drawn into the materials do they think about its research base. A Fairfax County teacher described how she evaluates materials: "You're going to make your decision about how valuable this piece is once you've been hooked and take a look through it." However, at some level, teachers apparently expect the material presented to them to have a basis in research.

Teachers tell us that one way to "hook" them to research-based information is to present it in terms of the roles they and others play in successful implementation. Teachers recognize that applying strategies in their classrooms requires support from students and their parents, administrators, and other teachers. One Fairfax County teacher told us how information that is sensitive to others as well as themselves, "hooks you because they took the time to give it to the parent. They involved more than one person. . . I will take ownership of something that starts thinking about a parent and about your colleagues." Another teacher said she wanted materials she could give to parents that explained teaching strategies she was using in the classroom.

In general, teachers would like the content of research-based information to: address their questions and concerns; provide a rationale that explains and analyzes the concerns; and, ground

the theory in reality with examples of teachers using the research. An AFT teacher described the process: "You start with questions. There are research principles to help answer those questions and some practical applications. Some case studies that show the application of that research practice and then, of course, the time to discuss it, debate it."

Dialogue can help teachers refine concepts in research to their every day needs. They would like to be able to use the information dynamically as part of an exchange with their colleagues. Research-based information can be more useful to them if it provides "discussion points" for teachers. An AFT teacher stressed the value of interaction when she said, "On top of that you need some feedback on how you're doing in the classroom. You need the time to interact with other adults in order to get that feedback to expand your understanding of the concepts."

5.1.5 Research and the Development of Teaching Strategies

One way in which teachers do value research is as a validation of the strategies they are already using. "Research is a confirmation of what I already thought I knew, or what I felt worked best, or what I felt good about. Somebody else would have a research study and I would look at it and I would say,`that's really what I see,' and I would feel good about that. It made me feel good as a teacher when they [researchers] confirmed what I felt I already knew." "A research article is something that confirms something you know about a child . . . It's more a factual thing and less creative."

Teachers are not attracted to narrow solutions to their instructional problems. Although they acknowledge that it may be useful for beginning teachers to have a step-by-step process to consult, experienced teachers said they are looking for strategies that they can shape to their own teaching styles. A general educator from Montgomery County likened developing instructional strategies to preparing a meal: "When you open a cookbook, I think you follow that recipe the first time through...The next time through, you're probably going to add your own ingredients or take away a little bit of some ingredient. You just play around with things. I think that's what we do in the classroom."

Teachers want to exercise their creative freedom in the classroom and develop solutions that address the child's needs and that fit their own teaching styles. Research that delivers a solution without addressing the many ways that teachers will want to use it in their individual classrooms is not received well. However, research that aids teachers in developing their own solutions will be more well received. One teacher from Fairfax County had more use for the issues of how and why research on a subject is conducted rather than for the results that came out of a particular study. She said the underlying rationale gives her, "a jumping-off point to formulate ideas on my own and adapt what they've done to a particular situation or child."

Another teacher echoed this sentiment when she described useful information

-- whether research-based or not --as a source of new ideas to develop in her classroom rather than as a validated procedure for teachers to follow step-by-step in the classroom. "When you read an article that gives you ideas about what to do in your classroom, it should give you more ideas about what you can do in your classroom. Not just `I'm going to go by the book of what this person says.' It should be able to give you lots of ideas and ways you can spin off of it."

When teachers are judging the value of research, they say they are more open to findings that are in synch with what they have already learned. Said a Montgomery County general educator, "I work on a general assumption from previous research. Things I got out of my Masters' [degree]. That says that I have a framework that I believe in. If somebody presents me with something that could possibly fit that framework, then I'll look at it more closely than if somebody says something that is diametrically opposed."

5.1.6 Deciding whether a Teaching Strategy Works

The principal approach teachers use to assess the effectiveness of an instructional strategy is to use it in the classroom and see if it works. They know that "it works" when they see appropriate levels of improvement in the child's performance. When asked how teachers know that an instructional strategy is working in their classroom, participants in all of the focus groups had similar responses. A special educator from Fairfax County replied, "I think as a teacher you know that already. I don't need to read an article to confirm what I'm doing is okay. I figure if they're learning, I'm doing something that's okay." An AFT ER&D general educator said, "Number one, [you know] through experience. You know what works with your children." A Montgomery County special educator noted, "The responsiveness between the student and the teacher is the ultimate thing."

One Montgomery County general educator explained more specifically why and how teachers use experience and classroom observations to evaluate the success of a strategy. "What works is what works. You'd like to believe that there's something based on research that you've read and it's working, so that if you ever had to defend what you were doing you could say, `well, research shows...,' but if it works you're going to do it. When you get in that room, it's something that works and you heard about it somewhere. I don't think your first thought is `I read this and research shows.' I think you're going to say `it's working here.' Because, we've done a lot where `research shows...,' and unfortunately it doesn't work. We bring it into our classrooms and we say well maybe research had it working in some classrooms, but it's just not working here."

In short, like most professionals, teachers judge effectiveness primarily by their own experiences with the techniques in question. Successful research findings apparently make teachers more likely to try out a particular strategy, but if it does not appear to be effective and there are no obvious ways to adapt it, teachers are quick to discard it. If the strategy works, the teacher incorporates into her "arsenal" of strategies; if it doesn't, she discards it.

Several teachers pointed out that they are expected to show results quickly and that there are no opportunities, in the structure or culture of schools, for mid-course evaluation, adjustments, and fine-tuning of a strategy. Teachers perceive this to be due, at least in part, to the concept of schools as political arenas in which policymakers and administrators leap from bandwagon to bandwagon, often to the detriment of teachers and students. Teachers perceive themselves as experimenting with strategies that they hear or read of, and that appear relevant to their students.

An additional factor at work here is that teachers apparently share the general public's skepticism about the validity of research (or more precisely, non-medical research). This skepticism manifests itself in comments such as the following: An AFT teacher said, "You can do anything you want with research. .. Everybody does that." A Montgomery County teacher said,"Research can show what you want it to show."

5.1.7 Colleagues as the First Source of Help

One of the questions in our moderator's guide for each focus group was "Where do you go first for help in solving an instructional problem?" The responses to this question were always, and logically, "other teachers in our school...other teachers that we know." It was not until we reviewed the videotape of the focus groups that we realized that our wording could permit no other answer. Teachers teach in school buildings; where else can they go first for help but to other teachers?

However, we can learn something useful from these responses because the central message -- that teachers rely on and trust other teachers in problem-solving -- was reiterated in their responses to several other questions. For example, teachers emphasize that they are interested in research articles only when they clearly show that the author has significant classroom experience and that the work is grounded in a real classroom setting. Teachers are also clear in their preference for learning instructional strategies by demonstration, by being shown, and by observing other teachers. In other words, one can conclude that teachers' first preference is to learn from other teachers, but it would be a mistake to conclude that is the only medium that teachers are receptive to or the only source for their problem-solving.

When teachers have a problem in the classroom, need assistance, or are looking for new ideas to try, almost all said they would look to another teacher first. A Fairfax County teacher said, "I read research articles for information. When I have a problem, I don't look there first. First, another teacher or person." The teachers outlined some of the qualities that attract them to other teachers for guidance:"They have experience in the classroom;" "you feel comfortable talking to them"; "They are open to you"; and, "They are knowledgeable in the field."

Two important reasons that teachers turn to their colleagues for support are that other

teachers are easily accessible and understand the school environment. A Fairfax County teacher voiced this bias favoring looking for answers from peers when she said, "As a teacher, I say to my kids, `ask three people around you before you come and ask me.' I need to do that too at my own school." Teachers are also drawn to other teachers for guidance because they are on-hand resources to consult as they solve problems. Said one special educator, "Just reading an article doesn't do anything for me. I have to see someone using the idea . . . If you read an article and you're stuck, then you're stuck." Another teacher relies on her peers because,"To solve a problem you need dialogue, and you can't really converse with an article."

The value placed on teacher colleagues is critical in teachers' problem-solving. "You don't usually know [whether the information is valid]. You know the teacher. There are teachers you're going to go to that you're comfortable with who probably have the same kind of teaching style or beliefs as you."

In addition to this comfort factor, teachers value first-person testimonials about the efficacy of an instructional strategy. Said one, "I'd like to see examples before I try something new." The value of going to other teachers is that they offer information based on first-hand experience rather than abstract (and perhaps theoretical) findings. Teachers know that if a colleague has tried something and made it work, then that teacher has struggled with all of the aspects of trying a new strategy. They know that the strategy can work in a real setting similar to their own and that its results will be measured in terms of changes in their students' learning behavior and not in terms of "time on task" or some other abstract research factor.

5.1.8 How Teachers Learn About Research Findings

Teachers complain about their lack of access to research. Often, when they do learn about a research finding it is in the form of a negative story carried by the media. The research that teachers noted in the mainstream press was usually related to violence in schools or low student achievement. Effective teaching strategies are absent in the media. "One of the reasons why I think our colleagues don't buy into the research is because they don't hear about educational research enough...How often do you hear about educational research on 20/20 and Good Morning America? Very seldom, or it's negative."

This dearth of coverage is frustrating to teachers. "If we saw more about what educational research was about. .. Doctors are able to translate [medical research] and put it on TV because it reaches the `mass audiences.' Why can't educational research be put on the media so parents can see it, the community can see it, and teachers can see it? Why do we keep it a secret?"

When teachers hear about research in their schools, it is mostly when they are expected to implement a new program based on research. "You don't hear about educational research from your districts, either. What you hear about are commercial programs [that] accessed the basic

research and packaged it and programmed it. Teachers are presented with a new program or package every four years, and it's `off with the old and on with the new.' There's no creativity, and it never connects with what came before it."

5.1.9 Research and Instructional Mandates

Research that is used to support a mandated program or practice is most likely to be viewed negatively by teachers. "A lot of times we're not asked to do something, we're mandated to do something. We're not treated as professionals. Our opinion, what we know, our knowledge, really isn't respected. I don't feel respected when someone tells me I have to do something . . .in spite of research."

So, when research information comes from administrators, teachers say they will be particularly defensive and unreceptive. Overall, the teachers rated their principal or curriculum or instructional staff in the central office as one of the last sources they would turn to for help in solving instructional problems. "As an experienced teacher, when upper-level people present you with some recent research, there's a real kind of defensive feeling that some teachers have. I've had it myself. The next step is we're going to be told to implement x,y, or z...What it means is people imposing things on you."

Another problem with this proliferation of mandates is that it spreads teachers — and instruction — too thin. In general, general education teachers reported that there are too many curriculum and content requirements placed upon them. "It's being asked to do too much. It's teaching, concentrating on content, concentrating on how you're interacting with the child and all those things that we know are what works. But they're also asking you at the same time to do everything, to teach everything, so I think that you don't have the luxury of doing a good job at anything. You don't cover the content," said one teacher from Fairfax County.

Another educator from Montgomery County echoed this feeling of research being used to coerce their decisions about instruction. "I feel like I'm given the content and it's rammed down my throat and they're saying: `this is what you have to get done by the end of the year, whether your children are able to do it or not.' There's no give or take."

Teachers see these requirements based on school board and administrators' decisions which are not related to research findings. "This is all what the County is mandating, it's not coming out of research." The perception is that policy decisions are made almost arbitrarily, in isolation of research.

5.1.10 The Effect of Mandates on Teaching Practices

Teachers object to mandated approach because they say they are imposed upon them, disempower them, and do not respect their judgement as professionals. Said an AFT teacher, "Teachers have not been in on the ground floor. It's hard to assume ownership and a dynamic interest in something if you feel it's a mandate and a given."

A Montgomery County teacher spoke defiantly about mandated instruction: "They [school boards and administrators] have a guide that they expect you to follow word for word. Most people don't do it from what I understand, but that is the expectation. On Day One, this is what you're going to do. Day Two, that's what you're going to do. There needs to be that leeway that you're a teacher. That you're trained, that you're a professional, and that they are going to treat you as such."

It was clear in all three of the focus groups that general education teachers are more constrained by instructional mandates than special education teachers are. Special education, partly because of the very nature of its commitment to individualizing instruction, permits -- in fact encourages -- teachers to choose the instructional approach best suited to the child's needs. However, both general and special education teachers avoid the constraints of mandates by means of a strategy that was volunteered in all three focus groups: "You close the door and do what works." A general education teacher from Montgomery County described her belief in teacher judgment in this statement: "If you know the topic . . . and you have a certain amount of confidence in what you're doing, that you're meeting the needs of the children in front of you, I think you can change just about anything."

When asked about the actual constraints created by mandates on their instructional practices, one teacher said she would "sneak in the other [unmandated] approach" if it were appropriate and more effective. Another teacher reflected the feeling that no matter what teachers are told to do, they maintain their own independence in the classroom. She said, "I'm in the general classroom. I feel very free from the mandate."

Still, teachers feel challenged when they are expected to be held accountable for their practices based on mandates. Teachers felt that the requirements for carrying out mandates varies according to how their school administration interprets the mandate. A Montgomery County teacher explained, "that's what makes it difficult when the County says, `this is what we're all going to do,' as if we're all doing the same things, and we're not. We're all not working with the same kids and the same expectations."

Teachers reported that there is a tacit understanding between administrators and teachers that mandates are not followed. Teachers see mandated instruction as a technicality for their jobs in the classroom. If they produce measurable student outcomes, the administration will be satisfied and not worry about enforcing the mandate. If the students are not succeeding then the mandate becomes a larger issue. Special education teachers characterized measurable success for their students as fulfilling the requirements of the I.E.P. A Montgomery County teacher articulated this pact between teachers and administrators. "As long as there's success happening

by whatever way a particular teacher is showing success with her students, then the administration is going to be happy. I think it's when there's nothing happening, when you're not showing that growth with the students, then there's going to be some questioning."

General education teachers say they feel the real imposition on their teaching does not necessarily come from mandated practices. Rather, it comes from subjects where the administration is held accountable on standardized tests for the success of students. A teacher from Montgomery County cited a writing test that is conducted by the County to assess student performance. Teachers often find that the teaching that they are required to do in the classroom is actually geared to ensuring high performance of their students on standardized tests.

In contrast to general education teachers, special education teachers reported that they have more flexibility in choosing their strategies. A special education teacher from Montgomery County described problems in choosing a single approach to teaching students with learning disabilities. "A lot of them have no strength areas...then it's just trial and error and I swear to God that some days one thing will work and some days another thing." A Fairfax County special education teacher also noted how important it was to have flexibility in choosing her teaching approach. "Special ed teachers in my school can use other strategies and materials, but not general ed teachers. " Another Fairfax County special education teacher added, "We've been told to do what you need to do to meet the needs of your population."

5.1.11 Mandated Approaches to Reading Instruction: Effects on Practice

A Montgomery County general education teacher shared a detailed story about mandates and reading instruction. "This year we got a new reading specialist who decided that everybody needed to be re-educated about how to teach `writer's workshop'...There is only one way to do this according to her, and so she's trying to ram it down everybody's throat. Consequently, what you get is that when she's around and she's in the room, this is how you teach it. But still, it's your classroom. When everybody's out and you're there, you still go back to what you think works and what you're comfortable with, and you do it your way."

Nearly all of the teachers have the perception that the authority and experience teachers have gained from their classrooms is treated with little respect by administrators. "To have the approach [whole-language] that your school is now going to is throwing out the valuable baby with the bathwater. We're changing, we don't retain anything ever. We just simply supplant it with something else and obviously some kids need heavier reliance on a kind of phonic approach. You teach a variety of techniques, you zero in on the kids that especially need one or the other...[not] one size fits all. It's not left up to teachers to use their own judgment and what they have learned to try to match what they have to offer to what kids need."

5.1.12 Reading Instruction: One Size Doesn't Fit All

The focus group probed teachers about reading instruction to investigate the influence of the body of research-based knowledge on whole-language and phonemic awareness.

Unlike the either/or approach many researchers have used in investigating phonemic and whole-language reading practices, teachers do not see this debate in such black and white terms. "It may exist but it's not necessary. You can teach a whole-language approach and still teach skills. Part of a whole-language approach is to break up into groups and teach skills," said one teacher. "They [researchers] call things mutually exclusive when they're not really," said another.

Teachers' choice of strategies for reading instruction reflects their practical streak. They reported that the reading instruction strategies they select and use depend on the individual needs of their students, even in general education classes.

What teachers said mattered most about the reading instruction strategies they chose was whether or not their students are learning to read. A Fairfax County teacher said, "Who's to say what's right and what's wrong? I don't think you can go by just one study. A combination of everything is the way to go...I don't really care why it works, as long as it does. I can work my VCR, I don't care what's going on inside. If I can teach my kids to read, whatever method I'm using, I'm happy."

A Montgomery County teacher encouraged this flexible approach as well. "You need a little bit of everything. You do a little phonics, you do a little bit of whole-language. And you can tell what works by seeing if the children are successful."

Teachers feel that it is more important to concentrate on defining the desired end results of instruction for students rather than trying to limit the means of reaching those goals. One AFT teacher compared choosing strategies to getting a treatment from a doctor. "You don't want to be the patient who's ill and because the one and only method of treatment doesn't work, that's it, case closed. I think we need to identify what it is we want students to be able to do. Once we do that, I don't think there's anything wrong in admitting there's a combination of methods."

For students with learning disabilities, the need to choose among teaching strategies is seen by teachers as not just desirable but absolutely necessary. A Montgomery County special educator described her choice of strategies for her students as "some of this and some of that...It has to be more than one approach to reading. That's not the only approach you're going to use for these kids."

The consensus that students with learning disabilities need to have a broad choice of strategies in order to learn to read was reflected in teachers' discussions about the relative merits of whole-language and phonemic awareness approaches. Fairfax County special education teachers asserted that phonics, whole language and individualized instruction were all identified as important for effective reading instruction.

One teacher implied that the phonics approach was an appropriate reading instruction strategy for students with learning disabilities when she said that, "LD kids need so many repetitions and basal readers provide that controlled vocabulary. [The students] need short lessons that they can grasp, not a long story." But one of her colleagues added that a broader approach (as in whole-language) was equally important. She said, "They don't just acquire it [reading skills] by being introduced to it. They need to try it out in different ways." Yet another teacher noted that regardless of the methods, the individualized quality of special education was what helped students with disabilities learn to read. She said that "the methods used in large general classrooms are the same as those used in special ed, but when you get [students] in a small group or individually, they pick it up."

Interestingly, special educators recognized that a number of the students in their classrooms probably end up there because they cannot learn to read in general education classes where whole language reading instruction strategies are mandated. A Fairfax County special education teacher said, "With the resource kids, if they went back to real phonetic reading we would be out of jobs because a lot of the kids that we get are not responding to whole-language. The kids who are not picking that up become candidates for our programs."

In the focus group of AFT teachers, a special educator believed that whole-language or single approach mandates are responsible for students winding up in her classroom. "I do work with children who probably would not be referred to me if we had a more eclectic reading system in my school. We have created my clients for me. Sometimes I collaborate with a psychologist to find little blips so I can get them to my program so I can just use anything I want to."

5.1.13 Information Needs for Reading Instruction

When teachers were asked what types of information they would find useful in teaching reading instruction, they indicated they were looking for advice that was practical and would allow them to make decisions about appropriate reading strategies on their own. As one teacher put it, "Different things that I could truly use that I could put into practice right away that would work with those children on an immediate basis. I don't really need to know the research a lot."

To the extent that teachers want to know the research on reading instruction, they said they would like to learn about the theories underlying teaching strategies. One teacher from Montgomery County said, "The ones [research studies] that I have gotten the most out of are those comparing direct instruction versus cognitive behavior management and whole-language approaches. It had all three names in the title, so automatically, you want to find out: is this the way to go?, or is this the way to go? or is this the way to go?" Another teacher added, "If I am reading research I want to read a review of the literature. I want to read the pros and the cons and have it all in one place...present me the articles and then let me figure it out."

An AFT teacher also wanted more background on the theories of reading instruction,

saying she would like to see "up-to-date discussion on theoretical models of the reading process. I work with kids who can't make it in the mainstream and I find that's because we're back to this one-size-fits-all. A lot of commercial products don't take into consideration that children have different learning styles, preferences, strengths, and weaknesses."

A special educator expressed a need for information about ways to provide students with learning disabilities with reading skills they need using a whole-language approach. "In my school, Integrated Language Arts [Fairfax County's whole-language instruction model] is a big thing and with LD kids, I find that it really doesn't work for them." She added, "You get an LD kid and ask them to read the trade books . . . and they just can't do it. They don't have the skills. I've struggled trying to figure out how I can integrate the two of them [whole-language and phonemics] successfully. I don't think most kids [have that problem]. I think just LD kids. The baby's been thrown out with the bath water."

5.2 How Teachers Would Like to Receive Research-Based Information

The focus groups examined how research could be presented and made more accessible to teachers so that they would be more likely to use research-based information on instructional strategies.

5.2.1 The Presentation of Research

5.2.1.1 Language

Language is one of the greatest obstacles to teachers understanding and using research. Since researchers are writing for other researchers, they use terminology and formats that are familiar to this audience. However, this style does not translate well to practitioners. Teachers say they find the research articles difficult to read because they are written in a clinical style with unfamiliar terms.

Teachers from all of the focus groups told us they need research-based information that is not written in "research-ese." Instead, teachers want information in language they describe as "user-friendly." A Fairfax County teacher said, "If I'm reading an article, I want it to be written in very simple language."

5.2.1.2 Formats and Media

To better understand teachers' preferences about the format of research-based information, we presented them with several example materials including CEC publications, a research journal, a National Education Goals Panel Report, an Attention Deficit Disorder Information Kit, and an NCTM mathematics teaching guide.

An AFT teacher, reviewing these sample materials, was attracted to one which she called "a user-friendly package...It's in a language I think that teachers really understand. They don't have to go to another colleague to get the colleague to translate it."

Length of materials is another factor in teachers' response to research-based information. Since time is a demon that teachers fight constantly, for many of the teachers in the focus groups, reading lengthy research articles and reports is a process that they find difficult to balance with their other duties. A Fairfax County teacher reviewing an example of a long research report commented, "I don't have the time to read this."

To deal with time constraints, teachers said they want research-based information that is "quick reading." A Fairfax County teacher said,"I have to look at things that are quick fixes, things that can give me answers right away."

Using a modular format for materials, such as a folder, is one solution that addresses the challenge of time. Teachers said this open format allows them flexibility in choosing when and how much information they will review at one time. A teacher reviewing materials in a folder format was drawn to it because, "I have a tendency to grab bits and pieces, I like that possibility here."

An AFT teacher expanded on this preference for short related pieces packaged together by contrasting a folder format with a large report, "It's [the long report] overwhelming. There's an awful lot of very small print. It looks like you need some serious time to get involved in this particular thing. Typical, looks like you have to go front to back. The buses are rolling, the kids are coming in, you've got all that other stuff to do. Something that's packaged in a folder, you can take out what you might want to use...There is a sense you can do a piece of it and go back to it."

They said that this format allowed them to use the information in a variety of ways. Teachers noted that when they find instructive and useful materials, they like to be able to share them with peers and parents. They felt that research-based information could be made more accessible if it could be easily reproduced on a copier.

Since the last time teachers said they used statistics was in college, the text of research-based materials needs to be clear and concise with numerical data illustrated in charts and graphs that communicate the point quickly. They stated they neither have a need nor an interest in extensive statistical analyses in research-based material. A Montgomery County teacher said, "If it doesn't have a lot of statistical information, I'm going to be able to stay with the article longer."

Teachers said when they read an article, they need to know the key points that shape the discussion. A side bar highlighting the major issues in a longer article would make it easier for teachers to understand. A Montgomery County teacher said, "I think the research articles or the magazine articles that you gravitate towards or tend to get through, are the ones that at some point in the article bullet or list `these are the elements'[central themes]."

Teachers told us that research-based information needs to be supported by other research in the field. One way teachers said they would like to have a listing of materials for background or additional reading. An AFT teacher said she would accept research-based information if she could see that "there's a lot of resources that have been used in putting it together."

Teachers are sensitive to the issue that research is an on-going activity and that new findings can build on or refute earlier studies. If teachers receive research-based information, they want to know it is based on the latest results of research. They told us that the format of the information influences this judgment.

When presented with a series of research-based materials, one Fairfax County teacher

held up one set of materials in a modern-looking folder and said,"it needs to appear current, this might have been the most up-to-date research finding." She then held up a large bound report and added, "this took time to put together and is probably more out of date."

As an alternative to a real, live person, teachers said that they would also like to receive videotaped materials. Teachers from all of the focus groups acknowledged the value of videotapes to demonstrate examples of how research can be put into practice. A Fairfax County teacher said, "Show us a video of what's happening in [another teacher's] classroom and how she sets it up so it looks like you can manage it, and go back upstairs and do it the next afternoon."

Teachers from the Montgomery County focus group shared their insights on the benefits of videos. A teacher acknowledged that videotapes can support the ideas that she reads about in articles. "If I've seen a videotape or if I've read an example of how a teacher is using certain strategies in a classroom, I would be more likely to use that with my groups of students rather than just reading the article or the research." Another Montgomery County teacher said videos are "a real good way for people to say, `Yeah, I could really do this.' Sometimes when you're reading [an article] you say, `I don't know how I would implement that.'" Someone else added, "My preferred way of doing it would be to read about it and think, `well gee, I'd like to know more about this' and then have access to the video to really be concrete about it."

Videotape can be a useful means of illustrating how teachers can apply a research-based strategy to a variety of classrooms. A teacher cited a videotape she found very instructive because it presented a series of teachers using a similar teaching strategy in different classroom settings with different students.

5.2.2 Vehicles for Reaching Teachers

Teachers would like to get research-based information from a group they trust — organizations they are involved in and have ties with, such as teacher unions and the Council for Exceptional Children. Considering their preference for guidance from other teachers, it should be no surprise that they would want another teacher, not a researcher, to deliver the information. Many of the teachers' first choice for receiving information was "a live person presenting who really knows her stuff."

5.2.2.1 Perceived Problems with Inservice Training

Teachers all say they want to interact with their peers around issues of practice but they have a strong resistance to inservice training in its current form. Like research in general, teachers do not see inservice training as addressing their classroom concerns. An AFT teacher recognized that "there's been such a history of bad staff development." Teachers felt that staff development was not treated as an important aspect of their work. One teacher reflected the

experiences of many when she said, "The only people who are sent to conferences or workshops that are exciting are people who are no longer in the classroom working with students."

An AFT teacher said the problem with staff development is "school structures that do not reflect a policy of the value of professional development. I can't think of any other profession that figures that if you're not with a client you're not working. We're not modeling in ourselves the importance of lifelong learning."

Another AFT teacher said that teachers' attitudes toward in-service training do not reflect a desire for professional growth. "You listen to teachers say that they want the opportunity to share, be collaborative, to sit down with their colleagues and learn to be the expert. But when they're given the opportunity, the majority of teachers...will take off rather than sit in a staff development meeting...Before we look at any change in instruction we have to look at change in ourselves." However , the teachers in the other focus groups expressed a strong interest in relevant professional development courses, taught by experienced teachers, and with meaningful administrative support in the form of released time, money for travel and registration, and followup aid in implementation.

These opinions seem to be involved with the quality of staff development activities. Teachers said that the in-service training they receive is more motivational that practical. They are given advice that is applicable only to ideal rather than real situations. Teachers also expressed the need for a form of professional development that involves having time to interact with other educators, preferably observing each other in classrooms.

5.2.2.2 A Different Vehicle: The AFT ER&D Program

While teachers from Fairfax and Montgomery Counties shared many perspectives about research, the teachers who participated in the focus group from the AFT's ER&D Program[1], developed by the union to introduce teachers to research and allow them to share it with their

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[1] The AFT's Educational Research and Dissemination model program takes teachers from across the country and starts by introducing them to educational research. They learn about the educational research by meeting and listening to researchers, working on research projects with them and even developing and conducting their own studies. After the teachers have been steeped in the educational research world, they return to their school district and share the knowledge they have gained with their peers.

peers, reflected a greater acceptance, sophistication and receptivity to research.

Although the ER&D teachers recognized the difficulties research poses for other educators, they have overcome this hurdle and feel more comfortable with research. They all believe the ER&D process helped them learn the value of research.

One AFT teacher described the qualities of the program that make it effective for teachers. "It's volunteer and non-judgmental. When we went through our training, [ER&D teachers] built a certain level of trust. People could really reflect on their own practice and bring up issues and reflect on the research and say, `does this make sense to me?' It wasn't shoved down anybody's throat. That's how we engage people. We never come in and say, `I'm the expert and I'm going to impart this knowledge to all of you about the research.' We go in and say, `I'm a classroom teacher...These are some things that have come from the research. What do you think about them? How do they make sense to you? Does this make sense?'"

6. IMPLICATIONS

There are enough clear patterns in the responses among the three focus groups to provide meaningful guidance in how best to communicate to teachers persuasively and effectively:

- Just as teaching is a social, interactive process, teachers prefer to learn in social, interactive ways -- by demonstrations, by being shown, and by observing the teaching process.

- Whether the learning medium is a demonstration, a print product, or something else, teachers need the verisimilitude and authenticity of knowing that the strategy in question was researched and used by real teachers in real classrooms.

- Any form of communication by non-teachers to teachers will be more effective if the teachers are addressed/treated with the respect accorded to other professionals, and if the communicator understands that choosing, adapting and changing strategies is an inherent part of the teaching process, and not necessarily an invalid implementation of a strategy found effective in rigidly controlled, experimental research.

- When communicating with teachers in writing, keep messages concise and readable, and break up the text with bullets or other reading aids.

- Teachers, like the rest of us, are members of the general public, and they can be persuaded by means of the same mass media strategies that are used to persuade the public of the value of ideas that are in the public interest.

7. LIMITATIONS ON THE INTERPRETATION OF FOCUS GROUP DATA

It is important to keep in mind that the information gathered in focus groups is not quantitative data. It is qualitative, conversational, and, to a certain extent, anecdotal. Even the most rigorous interpretation of focus group data is necessarily intuitive in nature. Consequently, the information gleaned from focus groups should be considered as guidance and not as definitive proof of any attitude, idea, belief or practice.